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ABSTRACT

A bilingual language test was constructed and standardized on 384 children in three groups: Spanish-speaking Mexican-Americans, English-speaking Mexican-Americans, and Anglo-Americans. The three groups' scores were significantly different. Data on parents' income and education was obtained and compared to the children's test performance. No significant differences in scoring were found between different income or educational levels. This indicates that the group scoring differences may have been due to cultural or testing variables not related to income or education. (Author)

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THE INFLUENCE OF PARENTS' INCOME, EDUCATION AND CULTURE ON LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE OF CHILDREN IN A TEXAS BORDER TOWN

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A bilingual language test was constructed and standardized on 384 children in three groups: Spanish-speaking Mexican-Americans, English-speaking Mexican-Americans, and Anglo-Americans. The three groups' scores were significantly different. Data on parents' income and education was obtained and compared to the children's test performance. No significant differences in scoring were found between different income or educational levels. This indicates that the group scoring differences may have been due to cultural or testing variables not related to income or education.

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THE INFLUENCE OF PARENTS' INCOME, EDUCATION AND CULTURE
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Lower socioeconomic children have been repeatedly shown to have poorer language skills than their well-to-do peers. The comparisons, however, have generally been completed from a middle class vantage point with instruments which have been standardized on white, middle class children. Such comparisons produce tenuous conclusions about the influence of poverty on language. In order to determine the real effects of poverty, culture and parental education on language development, a valid test for all groups being compared must be created.

The Del Rio Language Screening Test - Spanish/English (DRLST)[1] was constructed, standardized, and found to be valid for three distinct groups of children: Spanish-speaking Mexican-American children, English-speaking Mexican-American children, and Anglo-American children. The Spanish and English versions of the test are similar but contain some different items which are appropriate for the distinct populations of Del Rio, Texas. The different versions of the test have the same number of items and are scored the same, making a comparison of the groups mentioned possible. There are five subtests of the DRLST: (1) Receptive Vocabulary, (2) Sentence Repetition-Length, (3) Sentence Repetition-Complexity, (4) Oral Commands, and (5) Story Comprehension. The test was standardized on 384 children between the ages of three and six years, eleven months. There were 128 children from each major ethnic and language dominant group.

It was hoped that the norms from all three groups would be close enough that they could be combined into one over-all norm which would be valid for children in Texas border towns. This was not the case. In spite of the purported validity of the DRLST for each subgroup, the Anglo children as a group obtained significantly higher scores than the two Mexican-American groups, and the Spanish-speaking Mexican-American children scored significantly lower than the English-speaking Mexican-American and the Anglo groups. Therefore, three separate sets of norms, based on ethnic group and predominant use of Spanish or English, were presented.

1. Toronto, Allen, et al., Del Rio Language Screening Test (Spanish/English), National Educational Laboratories Publisher, Austin, Texas, 1975.

Information on income and education of each child's parents was obtained during standardization of the test, thus allowing a comparison of these variables with test scores. The following table presents the group results on the test and compares them to the mean income and educational level of each group:

	Group Performance	Mean Income	Mean Education
Anglo children	Highest*	$12,520	14 years
English-speaking Mexican-Americans	Middle *	9,600	12 years
Spanish-speaking Mexican-Americans	Lowest *	5,510	8 years

*Scores significantly different from the other two groups.

The positive correlation of test scores, income and educational level of parents raises the question of causal relationships. Do the factors of income and education contribute significantly to the scoring differences on this test, or are the differences due to some other cultural variable not measured? In order to evaluate these effects, each major group was divided according to high, middle, and low income and education for a within-groups comparison. An analysis of covariance, which accounted for the increase in scores as age increased, was then completed using these variables. In addition, test scores were correlated with income in thousands of dollars and with education in number of years. Statistical results indicated that no significant difference in test performance was created within any group as a result of partitioning groups by income and educational levels. This was an unexpected finding and implies that other cultural or testing variables were probably responsible for the scoring differences.

In addition to the above statistical procedures, an analysis of variance was completed between the ethnic and language groups according to income and educational levels. In other words, the high income and education children were compared with the high income and education children in the other ethnic and language dominant groups, the middle were compared with the middle, and the low with the low. These results showed statistically significant differences between the groups at every level, but more of the subtests were significantly different at the lower income and educational levels. This reinforces the statement that other cultural or testing variables probably account for the differences.

It may be concluded for this sample, which was very representative of border town factions, that the scoring differences between the groups on the DRLST were not caused by parents' education and level of income. This is contradictory to what was expected and to what one would expect to find from reading the literature on language and poverty. The question still remains, "What caused these scoring differences?" Besides income and education there are several variables that need to be considered. These include experimental design of the study, cultural factors, bilingual factors, and testing factors. Hypotheses concerning each of these variables are presented as possible explanations for the scoring differences between the groups.

A complete comparison of income and education was not entirely possible in this study. The original purpose of the data was to standardize a test, and strict controls needed for a study on income and education were not practical. Therefore, we compared the Anglo group, which was heavily skewed in high income and education with the Spanish-speaking group which was heavily skewed in low income and education. In order to do a valid cross-groups comparison, one would need equal numbers in comparable levels for each group. It would also be better to study one age group at a time. It is felt that the data has some validity, however, because there seemed to be a wide enough range of incomes and education for each group with enough subjects at high and low levels to warrant a study.

There are three cultural factors which may have influenced test scores. First, attitudes towards communication with strangers seemed to be different for the Spanish-speaking group. Many of them were suspicious, shy, and slow to establish rapport with the examiners. This certainly would adversely affect scores on a test. Second, motivation for taking tests may be lower for the Mexican-American child. Academic competition does not seem to be very important to many of these children and their parents while physical prowess and social independence are of great concern. Third, unfortunately, the status or prestige of the Spanish language is low for many Anglo Americans as well as for many Mexican-Americans themselves. There is a covert feeling for many that speaking Spanish is bad. This attitude could not help but influence language proficiency and motivation to use Spanish freely.

Interestingly, the above cultural factors tend to accompany lower socio-economic groups. It is difficult to consider them independently from poverty.

Another variable that must be considered is that most of the children in the Mexican-American groups were bilingual to some degree while the Anglos were not. We defined language dominance as use of the language seventy-five percent of the time. The effects of two languages on language development are not known. Most writers, including myself, feel that bilingualism, per se, does not adversely affect learning.

The last variable to be considered is that of testing procedures. Even though the examiners were bilingual, Mexican-Americans, and well trained, they may have expected better performance from the Anglo children, thus influencing the children's performance and perhaps the examiner's scoring. This subtle factor cannot be ignored in testing minority children.

In summary, we have a study which shows no scoring differences in children from three groups due to income and education of parents. However, the children do differ significantly based on ethnic and language dominance grouping. To account for the differences, hypotheses concerning experimental design, cultural, language, and testing variables are presented. A study specifically designed to control all of these variables is necessary for further enlightenment. Indeed, this study raised more questions than it answered.